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Rita E. Gould: An Artful Sequence of Words

MENU

Tag: nonfiction

Science Asides: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring Still Speaks Its Truth

As Carson readily points out, most pesticides and herbicides do not solely target the intended pest but harm all life in the area.

Without fail, each Earth Day brings mention of Rachel Carson's most famous work of nonfiction, *Silent Spring*[1]—a book renowned for its role in forwarding the modern environmental preservation/conservation movements. Although published more than 50 years ago, this book, meant to raise awareness about the dangers of pesticides and herbicides commonly used in the early 1960s, continues to resonate with readers today. There is good reason for this continued interest. While one might reasonably expect a book discussing such a serious topic to be a dry but dire treatise, Carson surprises with her eloquence, her clear but never tiresome description of scientific knowledge, and her passionate reproofs of shortsighted policies.[2] And while our worries for this world may have changed (and indeed may have worsened), many of her concerns remain relevant.

> *Water must also be thought of in terms of the chains of life it supports— from the small-as-dust green cells of the drifting plant plankton, through the minute water fleas to the fishes that strain plankton from the water and are in turn eaten by other fishes or*

> *by birds, mink, raccoons— in an endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life.*

Scientific Interpreter

To discuss impact of pesticide and herbicide usage, Carson needed to dispel the notion that such chemicals found in household products and applied to lawns, gardens, fields, and forest were "safe", an impression conveyed by the manufacturers and government agencies alike. Carson, therefore, had to educate her audience about how ecosystems function, how chemicals agents operate and spread through various environments into others, and how exposed species (both human and non-human) were affected. She happened to be ideally suited for this task. Science and writing were Carson's twin passions, and she utilized both professionally at US Bureau of Fisheries (later, the US Fish and Wildlife Service) and when writing for the Baltimore *Sun*. She eventually transitioned to writing about science full time, publishing articles in the *Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* as well as bestselling nonfiction books about maritime species and environments. With this experience, she painstakingly (but never condescendingly) translated the technical scientific data underwriting her contentions into the crisp prose seen in *Silent Spring*.[1], [3], [4] Indeed, one of the achievements of *Silent Spring* is that it serves as an excellent layperson's primer for environmental studies.

> *How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?*

Grim Revelations

The picture Carson paints, beginning with the imaginative exercise of small town suffering from an ecological devastation to the actual places suffering devastating drops in beneficial insects such as wild pollinators,[5] bird, fish, and other animal populations—not to mention pet and human life—is a disturbing one. As Carson readily points out, most pesticides and herbicides do not solely target the intended pest but harm all life in the area. Pesticides either infiltrate ecosystem food chains and the surrounding soil and waterways, indirectly poisoning or killing other living beings. These chemicals, shown to persist long after application, continue to do damage as they chemically alter and/or combine with other pesticides used, potentially magnifying their destructive capacity. And the damage continues into the next generation, as reduced reproductive capacity is also seen among exposed creatures.

Among the species of bird affected by pesticides that Rachel Carson mentions in Silent Spring were robins, the herald of spring.

While this may seem like a regrettable necessity to protect crops or to decide between protecting trees or birds (to use her example), Carson reveals that the benefits of pesticides are remarkably short lived as they require repeats applications, often with increasingly deadlier pesticides since the surviving pest insects are immune to previously applied pesticides. Instead of eliminating pests, a pesticide-resistant species is bred. To further illustrate the futility of this exercise, Carson describes several, more effective methods for controlling pest species (both plant and insect), among them employing less broadly toxic and safer pesticides (eg, pyrethrin), using appropriate fungicides, selective

(versus blanket) spraying, introducing predator species, and increasing biodiversity; she also points to promising approaches in development. Not content to count the loss in terms of life and beauty, Carson also points out the dramatic costs involved with using chemical versus the usually less expensive, more successful alternatives she suggested. She is also quick to add another economic cost associated with destroying natural habitats: tourism is negatively affected by blighted vegetation and dying birds and fish.

> *The key to a healthy plant or animal community lies in what the British ecologist Charles Elton calls "the conservation of variety." What is happening now is in large part a result of the biological unsophistication of past generations. Even a generation ago no one knew that to fill large areas with a single species of tree was to invite disaster. And so whole towns lined their streets and dotted their parks with elms, and today the elms die and so do the birds.*

Lyrical Writer, Passionate Defender of Nature

Although Carson's book focuses heavily on the damage wrought by indiscriminate pesticide and herbicide usage, readers can readily discover passages describing the beauty of the natural world she loved throughout her text. Her imaginary small town that "lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields" evokes numerous rural places found throughout the United States (Carson 1). Her description of the western grebe is similarly vivid:

> the western grebe...is a bird of spectacular appearance and beguiling habits, building its floating nests in shallow lakes of western United States and Canada. It is called the "swan grebe" with reason, for it

> glides with scarcely a ripple across the lake surface, the body riding low, white neck and shining black head held high. The newly hatched chick is clothed in soft gray down; in only a few hours it takes to the water and rides on the back of the father or mother, nestled under the parental wing coverts (Carson 47).

Carson's compelling imagery enchants, just as the juxtaposition of dead animals (the western grebe were decimated by DDD [a chemical cousin of DDT] in the 1950s) and wasted swaths of vegetation shock. When we witness this beauty and contrast it with the results of indiscriminate pesticide and herbicide use—agents that often cause much harm with few results—it's easy to understand why Carson felt compelled to speak for the wild places and their inhabitants.[6]

The Continuing Call

As biographer Linda Lear notes, "*Silent Spring* compels each generation to reevaluate its relationship to the natural world."[3] It also reminds us that we are very much part of that natural world, which means the decisions we make for nature our ones we make for ourselves and future generations. It's difficult to read Carson's words and disregard the potential for harm we may do, should we not heed her call.

Read More

Interested in reading more works by women writing about nature and the environment? Check out this list on Goodreads featuring women writing about the environment and nature.

NOTES:

1. I used this copy of Silent Spring as my primary resource: Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Kindle ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002.
2. At points, such reproofs are savage. She purposefully defines eradication to make the point that a government agency's multiple "eradications" of gypsy moth are in fact glaring signs of pesticide failure: "Eradication" means the complete and final extinction or extermination of a species throughout its range. Yet as successive programs have failed, the Department has found it necessary to speak of second or third "eradications" of the same species in the same area (Carson 157–8).
3. Lear, Linda "Introduction." In: Carson, Rachel. Silent Spring. Kindle ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002.
4. Lepore, Jill. "The Right Way to Remember Rachel Carson." *The New Yorker*, 26 Mar. 2018, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/26/the-right-way-to-remember-rachel-carson.
5. Carson's mention of potential damage done to pollinators such as bees recalls recent concerns about neonicotinoids, insecticides which are thought to cause colony collapse. The European Union recently banned these chemicals.
6. Popova, Maria. "The Writing of "Silent Spring": Rachel Carson and the Culture-Shifting Courage to Speak Inconvenient Truth to Power". *Brain Pickings*, https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/01/27/rachel-carson-silent-spring-dorothy-freeman/

Writing Nevers

Exploring different ways to write doesn't necessarily need to achieve a specific endpoint or goal.

During grad school, I enrolled in a course that focused on writing personal essays. While I regularly sought out opportunities to improve my writing, my interest in this course partially stemmed from my inexperience with the genre. I'd been in many writing classes and workshops since my teenaged years, but I mostly wrote poetry, fiction, and academic papers. I didn't (and don't) keep a journal.[1] Discounting those personal statements for college applications, I'd written very little from my perspective.[2] Clearly, I missed a stop on my writing

journey.

As with all new to new-ish ventures, it took me some time to acclimatize to writing personal essays: I initially found it challenging to unpack my own experiences and turn them into writing material for the weekly theme. I eventually found my pace, and some of my anecdotes made a point well or earned an intended chuckle. But I could see I still had some way to go before I reached real proficiency. And however much I enjoyed the course (reading my classmates' essays often was inspiring), it seemed unlikely that I'd revisit the personal essay. I never felt quite at home writing about myself.

After writing about a year's worth of blog posts, I'd like to concede that I may have been mistaken.[3]

Exploring different ways to write doesn't necessarily need to achieve a specific endpoint or goal. Any time spent writing or learning about writing isn't wasted for a writer,[4] because more writing makes us write better. And what blogging taught me this year was that I didn't need to make any grand decisions about future writing. As it happens, I discovered that writing from my viewpoint became easier once I recognized the direction it would take: discussing my writing and reading experiences. I don't doubt that there are stories that are not mine to tell or genres that I will not master, but the only thing saying never did was limit the paths my writing could take. And frankly, that's a terrible way to end a tale.

NOTES:

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1. For the record, kudos to everyone who keeps a journal and can, whenever they so desire, peruse a record of events, thoughts, impressions, etc. At

present, my attempts still tend to produce writing that has grating "dear diary" tone that kinda bores me. ↩

2. Unless we're counting the occasional insertion of inappropriate humor and slightly knowing/know-it-all tone, in which case yes, that would be me. ↩
3. Before this descends into a not-so-humble brag, I've still think I've ways to go before I hit the summit for amazing writing. ↩
4. As it happens, I left that class with a greater appreciation of the personal essay format, which helped me become a more critical reader of them. ↩

March 26, 2018 / Rita on Writing / nonfiction, personal essay, school, writing, writing advice / 2 Comments

Why I'm Reading Women Writers for Women's History Month and Beyond

For Women's History Month, I originally planned to list works by women I want to read this month. I intended to point out that the reason I've been focusing on reading more women writers,[1] as I discussed in my post about Reading Women Month, is that women writers lack representation.[2] However, I thought this might be an opportunity to discuss how reading more women actually benefits us, given how women's representation and issues have come to the forefront over the last year (#metoo and #TimesUp movements, to name two). Reading gives us the chance to self-educate, to learn more about issues that affect us as well as access experiences that aren't ours. Reading a good book highlights problems women face, such as the wage gap by discussing its roots or revealing the true cost of all that unpaid labor women perform (*Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?* by Katrine Marçal, trans. Saskia Vogel).[3] Reading more written by women lets us discover the unsung women who made important contributions to this world, such as the black female mathematicians who helped NASA win the space race (*Hidden Figures* by

Margot Lee Shetterly). And being informed about women's contributions to society as well their issues often empowers action. Which takes me full circle to Women's History Month. One book I intend to read, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,[4] inspired the women who went off do something about suffrage in the United States. While another nonfiction work focuses on a funny woman (*Bossypants* by Tina Fey) succeeding in a field notoriously hostile to women, others are works of fiction I've heard good things about and wanted to read—books that in their own way that will expose to me women's voices. In addition, my daily reading involves targeted online zines (eg, Everyday Feminism) that keeps me current with the latest issues women face, certainly something I'll continue to do this month.[5] Regardless of the format, I intend to keep reading women throughout the year, because we deserve to be heard and celebrated.

NOTES:

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1. We also should work on reading inclusively, because more belongs on our shelves than works written by white, straight cisgendered individuals. ↩
2. Moreover, even women characters lack representation. ↩
3. IFL Science, helmed by Elise Andrews, published Women Scientists You Need to Know on this International Women's Day. Also in the "hidden history" category is Rebecca Skloot's book, *The Immortal Lives of Henrietta Lacks*, which discusses the life of Henrietta Slack, the woman whose cancer cells taken without permission led to countless scientific breakthroughs and raised serious questions about medical ethics. ↩
4. And yes, it is book that I said held the record for being on my to-be read list the longest. I promised to read it this year, and there's no time like the present. ↩
5. Recently, EF addressed women's unpaid emotional labor with update on

etiquette by Alice Williams: New Etiquette Rules for Women—Without the Sexism This Time.

March 11, 2018 / Rita & Reading / #readingwomenmonth, fiction, Margaret Fuller, Margot Lee Shetterly, nonfiction, Rebecca Skloot, science, Tina Fey / Leave a comment

Hidden Scientific History: How Humboldt Shaped Our View of Nature

In The Invention of Nature, Andrea Wulf seeks to reintroduce the English-speaking world to a once famed but largely forgotten figure who shaped how we view nature: Alexander von Humboldt.

Alexander von Humboldt by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1843.

In *The Invention of Nature*, Andrea Wulf seeks to reintroduce to the English-speaking world a once famed but largely forgotten figure who shaped how we view nature: Alexander von Humboldt.[*] Prior to Humboldt's scientific exploration of South America, western society largely assumed nature behaved much like a complex machine that was, for the most part, stable and unchanging. Many believed that nature existed for humanity's use, and some even argued, as French naturalist George Louis de LeClerc (Comte de Buffon) did, that wilderness was a wasteland that required civilizing. No one, as Wulf emphasizes, concerned themselves with the possibility that nature could be damaged or destroyed. However, Humboldt's observations in South America (then a colony of the Spanish Crown) led him to a very different conclusion.[†]

The “Web of Life”

While in South America, Humboldt intended to collect plant and animal specimens and record empiric data (eg, air and water temperature) as most naturalists did. However, the Prussian-born polymath had an additional aspiration: he wanted to see how natural forces worked in concert. Seeking a “big picture” view of nature, Humboldt’s approach was interdisciplinary and incorporated aspects of art, philosophy, poetry, history and politics. Humboldt’s choice to be inclusive and to compare across disciplines was unique, given that most scientific studies tended towards specialization and excluded the arts. His study of nature was not merely intellectual but also embraced emotional responses to the natural world.

With this “global view”, Humboldt’s radically revised the way in which nature was perceived. Far from the faithful machine depicted by René Descartes and others, Humboldt realized that nature was a delicately balanced “web of life”, one that human could tear asunder. While at Lake Valencia, Humboldt discovered that clear cutting a forest for cash crops yielded barren fields, a dried up river, and soil erosion. The first to recognize forests’ ecological role (ie, cooling effect, retention of water and soil), Humboldt would warn against irresponsible farming and mining practices. Thus, he became a forerunner of the environmental movement.

Nature writer, preservationist, and Sierra Club founder John Muir was among those whom Humboldt inspired. As an activist, Muir campaigned to designate several areas (eg, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon) as national parks. (Photo of sequoias in Muir Woods Monument. Credit: Jeremy S. Henderson.)

Widespread Influence

In writing about Humboldt, Wulf seeks to illuminate the reach of his influence from his time to ours. She describes contemporary scientists whose careers were supported, launched, or even inspired by Humboldt, among them Charles Darwin. Humboldt's prominence in the scientific community (she refers to him as its "nexus") existed alongside his ardent support for the free exchange of ideas and democracy.[‡] In South America, he witnessed the horrors of slavery and the abuses visited on the indigenous people whose ancient cultures were destroyed. His writings condemn slavery and challenge the supposed savagery of indigenous peoples. Símon Bolívar met Humboldt in Paris and found in Humboldt someone who admired his homeland and shared his disgust with Spanish colonial rule; their conversations would lead Bolívar to consider the possibility of revolution. Humboldt's vision of nature and popular publications resonated with writers such as English Romantic poets Samuel Coleridge and William Wadsworth; poets Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman; American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; and nature writers such as John Muir. Wulf also devotes several chapters to disciples of Humboldt who carried on his legacy.

Henry David Thoreau's book, Walden, was heavily influenced by Humboldt's writings, in particular his book Visions of Nature. (Walden Pond. Credit: Rita E. Gould.)

Humboldt's Legacy

Wulf's admiration for Humboldt is both deserved and contagious. Discovering the "hidden" history behind concepts I studied in my undergrad science courses was exciting:[§] I had no idea that adventurous undertakings such as mountain climbing led to vegetation and climate zones, let alone who was responsible for this new way of categorizing plants. And as someone with a degree in literature and one in with environmental studies, reading about Humboldt was fascinating as I saw names from two very disciplines intermingle, whether they influenced him (eg, Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, Immanuel Kant) or he inspired them (eg, Darwin, Thoreau, Muir). It truly is amazing to see how interdisciplinary knowledge unites to change the world. And it's perhaps for this reason that Wulf hopes to restore Humboldt to his

former prominence. As we now face human-precipitated climatic changes he once warned against, the interdisciplinary approaches he used will likely be needed. According to Wulf, Humboldt may well be the inspirational figure to guide us through these difficult times.

NOTES:

[*] Wulf posits that Humboldt's ideas potentially were so self-evident that his contributions was forgotten but considers the anti-Germany sentiment following the outbreak of World War I as a more likely cause.

[†] An earthquake that occurred not long after Humboldt's arrival left him shaken as it forever dispelled the notion that nature was static.

[‡] Some considered his acceptance of a pension from the Prussian monarchy hypocritical, while Humboldt looked at it more pragmatically: he could not pursue his academic studies without financial support. He did attempt to use his position to positively influence the monarchy and would successfully ensure that all slave who entered Prussia would be freed immediately. Humboldt's commitment to democracy also meant he was bitterly disappointed when the unification of Germany led to another monarchy in place of the federation he favored.

[§] And nowhere near as awkward as the time I realized my knowledge of the scientific method did not extend to its lengthy history.

January 19, 2018 / Science Asides / Alexander von Humboldt, Andrea Wulf, nonfiction, science, travel, writing / 1 Comment

Social Reading Recs: How Social Media Grew My Reading List

We often talk about what we're reading but not how we choose what we read. The story behind those to-be read lists, however, deserves its share of spotlight.

This past weekend, I went to the Baltimore Book Festival for the first time. Greeted by unseasonably warm weather, throngs of readers strolled among tents featuring authors talking about their works. I attended lectures on editing bon mots,[*] social justice, monsters in modern horror, and food in science

fiction. I bought and discussed books whose titles I just learned that day. Being an avid reader, I loved having the opportunity to delve into new topics and books I didn't know existed. Perhaps the only book-related topic I didn't hear mentioned was how we find the books we choose to read when we don't have a handy festival to suggest interesting titles. We often talk about what we're reading but not how we choose what we read. The story behind those to-be read lists, however, deserves its share of spotlight.

Baltimore Book Festival 2017, as seen from the Ferris wheel. (Photo by R. E. Gould.)

Polling the Readers

I'll admit that this topic that occurred to me well before I sauntered forth to

bake in the Baltimorean sunshine amongst the bookish. Perhaps a week or two earlier, I'd been looking over lists of books I read or intended to read and came to the realization that many recommendations came from Twitter, Instagram, Goodreads, WordPress, and even (on occasion) Facebook.[†] Being curious, I conducted a small poll on Twitter to find out whether any other readers saw their reading lists expand courtesy of social media. Slightly over half of my respondents agreed that social media helped grow their reading lists, with contemporary fiction writer and blogger Nastasya Parker observing that these recommendations made her reading "even more rewarding". Novelist Anne Charnock (*Dreams Before the Start of Time*) concurred, stating that "Twitter is good for book recommendations—from a bunch of people whose recs are pretty reliable". The remaining individuals divided into those who felt social media hadn't increased the length of their reading lists (slightly over 25%) and those who were unsure. Arguably, these results could depend on how those individuals use social media. Not everyone goes to Twitter and asks, "Read a good book lately?" or finds people whose reading habits resonate with their own.

Social Reads

I certainly hadn't expected better to-be read book lists to be part of the bargain when I'd joined some social media outlets.[‡] However, my first Twitter chat revealed the power of the social reading community. When several like-minded individuals gather to talk about books, there's a good chance for discovering new titles to read. In this case, the July 2016 #women_writers chat focused on reading women in translation, and, as I noted in a different post, I discovered a gap in my reading. It wasn't long before several books were proposed to remedy that problem. I could (and did) find articles suggesting books to read for #WITmonth (like this one), but receiving multiple recommendations for certain books or authors from this group really

identified worthy titles.[§] And I've had similar experiences with Instagram (The Reading Women come to mind) and my Goodread reading groups, to name a few.

Social reading isn't just for libraries.

So, spending more time on social media perversely improved my offline reading. Of course, it's not the only place to find captivating books to read. There's reviews (in print and online), best-seller lists, and so forth. There's even the simple expedient of walking into the local library or bookshop and checking out what's on display. Social media, however, makes it easier to connect with people who share your reading tastes and make reliable recommendations. Reading tends to be a solitary pursuit, but looking for new books to read needn't be lonesome.

Has social media improved your reading list? Let me know and share your suggestions for a good read!

NOTES:

[*] *The Old Editor Says: Maxims for Writing and Editing by John E. McIntyre*.

[†] I also created an imaginary click-bait link: "How Twitter Improved My Reading Life!" (In my head, titles like this seem to read by an old-timey news broadcaster). Naturally, should this article have existed, it would have parodied articles devoted to improving one's romantic/sex life.

[‡] Except Goodreads. Because that's rather the whole point, isn't it?

[§] Two different Goodreads groups recommended works by Han Kang (either *The Vegetarian* or *Human Acts*), as did Twitter chats and various Instagram posters. Both books were compelling, challenging reads.

September 28, 2017 / Rita & Reading / #readwomen, #womenintranslation, fiction, nonfiction, reading / 2 Comments

Blogging While Traveling in Alaska: Amusing Missteps and Lessons Learned

Travel is remarkable for the sights we witness as well as the experiences we gain. We discover how capable we can be with less as well as how to negotiate difficulties we encounter.

Traveling with Limited Tech

I tend to take vacations with few electronic devices, particularly when boarding an airplane restricts my carry-on space. Since sightseeing and other outings occupy most of my time, jotting ideas into a notebook or tapping a brief note into my phone works well enough to let me leave my laptop home. That is, until I started this blog and the inevitable conflict between my posting schedule and holiday plans arose. Knowing I would be traveling for almost two weeks, I decided to write at least one post while I was away[*] and began planning what I would discuss. Even with limited Internet access while traveling in Alaska (with a few excursions into Canada), I reasoned that blogging should be manageable.

Blogging with minimalist equipment (ie, my tablet), of course, would be less comfortable than usual, but swapping hiking boots for a laptop wasn't an option here. So I went about my normal packing routine,[†] until my spouse appeared holding what looked like a restaurant menu. It proved to be his spare wireless keyboard, which he said made typing easier for him when he used a

tablet. We soon had it connected, downloaded MS Word to my tablet, and typed a test sentence or two. And just like that, I had a serviceable mobile writing set up. Before starting his own packing, he suggested that I experiment with using it, to see how everything worked together.

It might like look the wine list, but it happens to be a wireless keyboard. (Photo by R. Gould)

I'm sure you've guessed by now that, harried by travel prep, I didn't get around to doing so. And thus I made the first in a series of eventually amusing missteps.

Roaming and Writing

Several days later, I sat perched at a makeshift desk in my temporary quarters and began to write in earnest. The keyboard, however, didn't share my enthusiasm. Roughly every third keystroke didn't register, forcing me to correct countless typos. As I forged onward at a glacial pace, my napping spouse awoke[‡] and insisted I use *his* wireless keyboard instead. With functional equipment, I finally made progress writing. All went well until I tried switch over to the WordPress app. The app I had on my phone, not my tablet.

And on my phone, I realized, I didn't have MS Word, meaning neither device had all the software I standardly use for blogging.

This is much funnier in retrospect.

The speed of typing on a semi-defective keyboard seemed oddly familiar after Mendenhall Glacier. (Photo by R. Gould.)

The complicating factor (because it's not ridiculous until there's complications) was the spotty Internet connection I mentioned earlier. While this was a minor inconvenience on occasions when I, for example, wanted to check whether sea mammals happened to be baby Orcas or dolphins (they were Dall's porpoise), I truly missed the Internet when I realized I couldn't use it to quickly fix my difficulties by downloading the apps I needed or by transferring the documents between devices. My choices involved making two trips to the Internet café (expensive and time consuming) or finding another solution. Feeling frazzled, I decided to forgo the fancier formatting MS Word gave me, connected the keyboard to my phone, and retyped the essay directly into the WordPress app. At least *that* went smoothly thanks to the new keyboard.

I missed Google when I couldn't use it to identify sea mammals (here, Dall's porpoises) but not as much as when I realized I needed to download WordPress. (Photo by Jeremy Henderson. Used with permission.)

Uploading in Its Time

But my Internet woes were not done. I still needed to look up two URLs for the articles I wanted to link to my post. So, I found the Internet café, agreed to pay the pricey access charges, and waited for the slow connection to upload my files. Once that was accomplished, I added the links, waited forever for the app to update…and discovered that some of the text I linked to an URL mysteriously disappeared. I fixed the text (itself a tedious process), updated again, and waited to see the corrected page. Satisfied that everything looked right, I logged off. I'd officially posted my first blog while traveling!

It wasn't until I returned home that I discovered that last update apparently didn't go through, and the version with errors went live.[§] *sigh*

Blogging and Travel

Despite my dearth of preparation and sundry mishaps, I nonetheless succeeded

in posting to my blog while on the road. Travel is remarkable for the sights we witness as well as the experiences we gain. We discover how capable we can be with less as well as how to negotiate difficulties we encounter. In my case, I gained several insights into how I can improve my writing experience for my next journey, which I've listed here for future reference.

Lessons Learned:

1. Check both writing devices and software before leaving, making certain that you have both the necessary apps and peripherals (including chargers) for your device. Confirm that your setup works before stowing it in your bag but consider what your options will be if something goes wrong anyway.
2. Test uploading and editing posts[**] from your mobile devices to find issues before you travel. I've used the WordPress app on my phone to reply to comments and make minor edits previously, so I knew differences existed between the mobile and desktop versions. Having a more accurate estimate for how long it takes to upload and edit posts, however, would have been helpful.
3. When possible, copy URLs and download images/videos to your device in case you need to work offline. You can embed these items in your offline draft (as I did with my post's image) so that they upload with the text, thus streamlining the process.
4. If free Wi-Fi and mobile reception aren't options, plan for long load times and buy Internet access accordingly—something I did right.
5. Choose a topic and outline/plan what you want to write in advance. Even if you intend to discover your topic as you travel, it doesn't hurt to brainstorm beforehand.[††] Expending less effort on prewriting ultimately proved beneficial when everything else went wrong.
6. Try to laugh at travel writing and its misadventures, because tech issues

and other unplanned hassles occur even when you are prepared.

NOTES:

[*] Given a less packed summer schedule, I'd have written posts before traveling. Perhaps next time.

[†] Oscillating between the worry I forgot something and the fear I brought too much.

[‡] I cannot confirm or deny that muttered profanity played a role in ending his nap.

[§] Thanks to everyone who liked my post despite the errors. For the record, they're gone but I won't forget them any time soon.

[**] I recommend marking the post as private if you don't want it to be seen.

[††] I'd had the idea to write about reading while traveling since I'd written about reading in preparation for travel, recalling (to my chagrin) dragging heavy books to exotic locations, only to neglect reading them.

July 28, 2017 / Rita on Writing / nonfiction, travel, writing, writing advice / 2 Comments

The Slipperiness of Resolve: the Mid-Year Reading Resolution Check-In

But why haven't I finished several books I fully intended to

read just yet? Simply put, other books beckoned.

How do your reading resolutions stack up against your to-read list?

Following weeks of temperatures in the 90s and 80s, January's cold seems distant as I contemplate the resolutions I made in that darker month. The resolutions in question, of course, are reading ones. With more than half the year gone, I reviewed the list of books I planned to read. Surprisingly, I discovered that I read exactly ***two*** books listed, with a third started (*Beloved* by Toni Morrison). A number I might find disappointing, had I not read (and wrote about) several other books since the list's genesis.

The Power of Other Books

But why haven't I finished several books I fully intended to read just yet?[*] Simply put, other books beckoned. I belong to online book groups that discuss a few novels every month. These books tend to inspire blog posts, so I place them a bit higher on my reading queue. I also visit my local library to

encourage my child's burgeoning reading habit.[†] Browsing the shelves allows me to find fascinating books I might not have otherwise encountered (*The Strange Library* by Haruki Murakami).[‡] There's also my own evolving reading goals: books I want to read for an upcoming trip, books gifted to me, and other projects that pop up (the #readingwomenmonth, to name one).

Weaker Resolve

In the interest of strict honesty, there are a few books I've delayed reading or finishing. Whether the book's density or subject matter required more attention than I could provide, I returned these to the "to-read" stack. For now. Some books I forgot I wanted to read because I made the list so long ago. Other books I put aside because they didn't suit my reading environment. When I want to read in a car or at the pool,[§] I like reading something that can be interrupted and readily resumed again. And finally, there's a few books I wanted to see as a movie first, because I suspect I won't enjoy the movie quite as much if I read the book beforehand (Sorry, *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel).[**]

I'd like to read Les Misérables at the shore, but the splashing is too distracting.

Reading On

For all that I haven't yet read, I'm so close enough to achieving the reading goal I set for myself on Goodreads that I will likely increase it. In the spirit of getting there eventually, I'm updating my list with the hope that I get to my unread books—along with several new additions to my list.[††] Included, too, are books I've read. Feel free to check links to books I've discussed in other posts. As always, happy reading!

2017 To-Read List
The Good Thief by Hannah Tinti (in progress)
Beloved by Toni Morrison (in progress)

Imagine Me Gone by Adam Haslett (in progress)

The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins

Human Acts by Han Kang (Translated by Deborah Smith)[‡‡]

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn

Howard's End by E. M. Forster

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Bad Feminist by Roxanne Gay

Les Misérables by Victor Hugo

Take Off Your Pants! Outline Your Books for Faster, Better Writing by Libbie Hawker

The Yiddish Policeman's Union by Michael Chabon

Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien

2017 Read List[§§]

The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman

Big Fish by Daniel Wallace

The Help by Kathryn Stockett

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot

All the Living by C. E. Morgan (read about it here and here)

Two Old Women by Velma Wallis

A Cold Day for Murder by Dane Stabenow

The Color Purple by Alice Walker

Swing Time by Zadie Smith

The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organi
Marie Kondō

The Snow Child by Eowen Ivey

Hidden Figures by Margot Lee Shetterly

Where'd You Go Bernadette by Maria Semple

Ordinary Wolves by Seth Kantner

The Strange Library by Haruki Murakami (Translated by Ted Goossen)

NOTES:

[*] Ignoring the obvious difficulties involved with limited time and the need to sleep, eat, and be present for other people and activities.

[†] As I wrote here, I used to start reading my library books as soon as I sat in the car. It's *thrilling* to hear my child turn pages as I drive home.

[‡] Library fines also motivate reading choices, it seems.

[§] Although I enjoyed reading *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin poolside, it seemed a bit inappropriate. And took longer than reading at home did.

[**] To borrow (misappropriate?) a chapter title from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, "Comparisons Are Odious".

[††] I've got to January, right? And there's always next year's list!

[‡‡] For #womenintranslation month, which is in August.

[§§] Most books I didn't include on this list were books I've read or re-read for my child, including books I've scouted out well in advance of his transitioning into YA books.

July 8, 2017 / Rita & Reading / fiction, nonfiction, reading / 3 Comments

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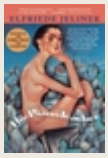
GOODREADS

The Piano Teacher
by Elfriede Jelinek



The Hate U Give
by Angie Thomas

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